

Randolph loses students Its first year as a coed college begins tomorrow with only 665 enrolled

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Enrollment at the newly named Randolph College is 665 students, the lowest in at least 25 years and down from 715 students last year.

The Lynchburg institution, formerly Randolph-Macon Woman's College, is set to begin classes with men for the first time in its history tomorrow.

The last time enrollment was nearly as low was 1998, when the school counted 686 students, school figures show.

Declining enrollment was one of the reasons cited for bringing male students to the formerly all-female campus, said spokeswoman Brenda Edson.

She said enrollment has fluctuated since the early 1980s, and although the most recent enrollment decline was steeper than most years, there have been even bigger drops in enrollment.

"It's not unusual for us to see big drops," Edson said.

In 2002, enrollment was 764 students. Last year's tumult over going coeducational contributed to the current slide, she said. It did not help that school officials were unable to market the school as they would have liked, Edson said.

"Enrollment is definitely lower than it has been, but we've had a year like no other," Edson said.

While the school drew students when it was all female, some would transfer each year so they could attend schools with male students, she added.

Last year's decision to admit males prompted protest and hard feelings from opponents who said going coeducational would change the school's culture and threaten its commitment to women's education.

The school officially changed its name July 1.

Members of Preserve Educational Choice Inc., which opposed the coed move, insist enrollment has been constant for 20 years. "Everything the college is saying is skewed," said Diane Montgomery, a Richmond attorney and member of the group.

Preserve Educational Choice filed two suits challenging the trustee's decision to go coeducational. Both were dismissed in Lynchburg Circuit Court.

A three-judge panel of the Virginia Supreme Court denied an appeal of the suit contending the school breached an implied contract with students when trustees decided to admit men.

The group is asking for a rehearing, Montgomery said.

On Wednesday, attorneys for the group will appear before a panel of state justices asking that they be allowed to go forward with their other suit. It contends that under state law, the school is a charitable foundation and needs state approval before it can change its charitable purpose and enroll men.

Single-sex schools thrive elsewhere, members of the group say, and this one should have also.

"While there is room for improvement, it has nothing to do with being a woman's college, it's management," said Ann Yastremski, executive director of the group.

Yastremski said her group does not plan any protest on campus but is concentrating on its court appearance.

Tomorrow, sophomore, junior and senior female students will see male students on campus for the first time.

Student Government Association President Hillary Peabody said she will likely make some comments about unification in her speech Tuesday at convocation, which is geared toward the seniors.

She says she also will talk about the school's history and does not expect any protest at the program.

"It's a pretty joyful time," she said.

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